

# THE 7 HABITS OF EFFECTIVE SUSTAINABILITY LEADERS

*By Wayne Visser*

Without bold and effective leadership – at a political, institutional and individual level – we will fail to resolve our most serious social and environmental crises. This short article summarises some of the findings from my work with the University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership<sup>1</sup>. To begin with, we distilled the following simple definition:

*"A sustainability leader is someone who inspires and supports action towards a better world."*

There are many characteristics (traits, styles, skills and knowledge) that are associated with sustainability leaders.<sup>2</sup> Our research suggests that the following seven key characteristics are among the most important in distinguishing the leadership approach taken by individuals tackling sustainability issues. Although it is unlikely that any individual will embody all seven characteristics of sustainability leadership, to give a flavour for each characteristic, they are illustrated below by observations from a selection of leaders, many of whom we have worked with and who demonstrate some of these qualities themselves.

## *1. Systemic, interdisciplinary understanding*

José Lopez, Executive Vice President Operations and GLOBE of Nestle, insists that "one of the elements that will really get us going in this sustainability fight is the elimination of the root cause for unsustainable behaviour, unsustainable business morals, unsustainable practices and so on. The ability to see the root cause of those things will set companies apart. They have to do with the profound thinking that you have and the processes of how you invest money and how you train your people and how you develop resources."

## *2. Emotional intelligence and a caring attitude*

Jan Muehlfeit, Chairman of Microsoft Europe, observes that "over the next ten years, the only way individuals, organisations and countries will succeed and compete will be through the ability to unlock human potential." He believes that "as a leader for the future, you would need to distinguish between motivations; you can motivate people's hands or their brains but you can't motivate their hearts – it takes real inspiration."

## *3. Values orientation that shapes culture*

Truett Tate, Group Executive Director (Wholesale) for Lloyds Banking Group, believes there is a "personal, almost spiritual commitment that needs to be epitomised in someone who is going to be successful in this sustainability space. So, a morality, a spirituality [which has] a great coupling with [having a] longer term vision." He adds that their credibility must come from "the way that they behave and interact with the world. They epitomise interconnectedness. They understand community [in the sense of] communion with facets of the world around us." Hence, although not everyone would characterise their actions in terms of spirituality, a values-based approach is critical.

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1 See for example, the Cambridge State of Sustainability Leadership publication series since 2011.

2 See my paper with Polly Courtice for a more comprehensive review of these:

<http://www.waynevisser.com/papers/sustainability-leadership>

#### *4. A strong vision for making a difference*

Ray Anderson, CEO of Interface, is well known for his vision to make Interface the first truly sustainable, zero-impact, or “restorative” company in the world, which their performance metrics suggest they are on-track to reach by 2020. He calls on “our people, our customers, our suppliers, our communities and our owners ... to learn and believe in a new and better way to be more profitable, and to reach for significance beyond success—a higher purpose for us all.” Hence, sustainability leaders are able to effectively communicate a compelling narrative on how their organisations can contribute to creating a better world.

#### *5. An inclusive style that engenders trust*

Ian Cheshire, CEO of Kingfisher, believes “leaders actually lead through teams. The idea that you have a superstar leader,” he says, “is just nonsense.” A great definition of leadership, he goes on to say, is “about getting people to go where they wouldn’t have gone on their own. If they can get there on their own then they don’t really need a leader. Equally, you can’t always be dragging them in the opposite direction to where they want to go.” Hence, leadership is about “the leader and the followers working together to get to certain outcomes”.

#### *6. A willingness to innovate and be radical*

Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop, exhorted leaders to “be daring, be first, be different, be just”. Similarly, Jeffrey Swartz (2010), CEO of The Timberland Company says, “Future capabilities will be very different, and will put a premium on lateral thinking and cross-functional, collaborative problem solving”. For Timberland, this includes not only designing cradle-to-cradle products like their Earthkeeper 2.0 boots, but also responding to challenges by Greenpeace and working with their Brazilian supplier Bertin to support the deforestation moratorium (meaning they will no longer source cattle from protected areas of the Amazon). Hence, sustainability leaders recognise that complex problems require creative solutions.

#### *7. A long-term perspective on impacts*

Neil Carson, CEO of Johnson Matthey, believes that “companies think much longer term than governments and good companies think much longer term than bad companies.” He makes the point that in terms of sustainability, long term thinking is especially important for leaders of sunset industries. “If you’re into coal mining and turning coal into heat and power, then you’ve got to think of the long term. You’re not really a coal miner, you’re a power supplier. You can look at ways of making things more efficient. Then you can look at ways of sequestering the CO<sub>2</sub>. You can make all these plans ahead of time and move in the right direction. And our experience is that the employees will really react very well to those kind of long-term plans. You get more out of the employees than you might expect if you embark on such a journey.”

### **Conclusion – Collaborative Leadership**

Ultimately, given the scale and urgency of the challenges, sustainability leadership needs to be bold leadership. It also needs to be collaborative leadership – leaders acting together at all levels of organisation and society. Many of the sustainability leaders that we spoke to emphasised the importance of collective action. James Smith, Chairman of Shell UK, told us that his view of leadership is not based on a hierarchical model but on the notion of a network – i.e. that the leadership is not invested in one person. Smith concedes that many CEOs do base their leadership on the cult of personality and cause things to happen, but their success is short lived. Sustainability leadership, by contrast, “is about cultivating good people for sustainability to be delivered.”

Hence, while individual leaders at the apex of organisations are critical change agents for sustainability, finding sustainability leaders or champions throughout our communities, government departments and companies, is also essential. Some call this approach 'distributed leadership', which MIT Professor Deborah Ancona (2010) says is "where junior leaders act when local needs arise and as organizational imperatives demand".

We all have the potential to be sustainability leaders, whatever our area of practice, whatever our role and whatever our level of seniority. We also conclude from our research that – given the paradox of sustainability leadership – the success or otherwise of the sustainability leader (whether individual or organisational, hierarchical or distributed) must rest with the performance of the company. Ultimately, sustainability leadership must be judged by the success of our actions – and whether we inspire and support others to follow our vision and passion for a better world.

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